Online books: convergence between books and electronic media


The issue of online books

Reviews in this journal are divided into book/CD-ROM reviews, www sites reviews and software reviews with each section having its own associate editor. Good structure, you would think, were it not that these different information platforms tend to blend and converge. As an illustration of that development, we present a review of two online books.

Let us face the truth. Over the past decennia or even centuries, academic publishers have been an organised, legitimate rip-off for academicians and scholars. We provide publishers with texts for free or a symbolic royalty fee. And then we buy them back at a very high and ever increasing price. Our only reward, unless we’re lucky to become one of those few academic mega-sellers, is the impact of having a publications record to support our professional career. ‘Publish or perish’ is what keeps academic publishers in business. True, we haven’t had many alternatives until recently. As an individual or an academic department, you could organise your own low-cost printing or rely on the services of a commercial lay-outer and printer, but then you also faced the task of marketing, dissemination, invoicing, …, in addition to the risk of the academic community not valuing your publication and it having no or a negative impact on your professional career.

Enters the information highway. You write your article or book in a word processor. Any of these can save texts in different formats, including HTML. Every academic institution has a web server. Consequently, it’s dead easy to upload the fruits of your hard labour onto the world wide web and have it available to many. Add a bit of graphical design and a strategy to let colleagues know about your work (through listservs, through links from other sites, …). Who needs academic publishers?

Example 1: IBM on social exclusion

In 1995, IBM launched a series of projects encouraging debate on the information society. One of these projects was a UK national working party on social inclusion in the information society, run in close collaboration with Kevin Harris of the London-based Community Development Foundation. The findings and conclusions of this working party are available in *The net result* with an overview and description of running projects being available in its sequel *Down to Earth vision*. Both are unfortunately out of print, but available through the world wide web.
The net result describes the major issues of the information society and the changing social context before dipping into the interaction between both. Following their analysis, the authors of the report highlight two basic developments critical for the information society enhancing social inclusion (paragraph 3.34): “for this to happen, there will need to be:

i) Widespread, user-friendly and inexpensive access to the information highway;

ii) A focus on helping to raise people’s information awareness and enhancing their skills to analyse, interpret, repackage and publish information.”

The authors label the second requirement the ‘information capability’ of citizens. From the perspective of social inclusion, it is probably at least as critical as the access to the technology and the skills to handle it. Consequently, it is to be welcomed that the authors in this report broaden the discussion beyond this more widespread limited interpretation. However, as this addition of ‘information capability’ is this report’s ‘competitive advantage’, it deserved a more prominent position in the report and a more in-depth analysis of its origins and appropriate strategies. For recognising that information capability is more critical to enhancing social inclusion than mere technology and basic computer skills, is admitting that providing public points of access to the information highway, the equivalent to public telephone booths, is an inadequate strategy. We may even need to go back to scenarios completely different from the telephone booth scenario, such as sociolinguistics and their work on social class and restricted and elaborate language codes.

Assuming the market can only gain from widespread access hence will make sure every household has access through their computer or television set within short time, the ‘added value’ of a human service perspective on the discussion of the information society should be the focus on this critical information capability of citizens.

Apart from this general line of thought and the main conclusions of both reports, there is an affluence of snippets of interesting ideas and catchy metaphors. It is worth the effort reading the documents closely to unearth these precious insights. To provide you with just one example of this, in section 1.9.ii of The net result, the authors raise the issue that any cost at the point of use of information becomes a barrier to access. “This means that certain categories of information, which could be considered essential for people to participate in society or for them to get support in times of need, should be paid for universally in advance, through taxation”. They call this the ‘999’ principle. You do not have to pay to call the emergency services. Again, this idea is a welcome expansion of the debate on universal access and the ‘999’ reference makes for a catchy metaphor.

Example 2: Digital libraries for social workers
The National Institute of Social Work in London has a long-term tradition of providing social work practitioners and scholars with information, both in its raw (publications) and digested format (consolidated reports). For those not familiar with the institute or its indexing and abstracting service Caredata, it is worth visiting their web site.

On behalf of the British Library Research and Innovation Centre, NISW launched their research project to identify recent developments in the field of digital libraries and how they may impact on special libraries in the social welfare sector. It covers barriers (maybe one should rather label them ‘challenges’) for both special libraries and social work practitioners in terms of resources, skills and technology. In that respect, this report fits nicely with both the theme of online books of these reviews and the information capability concept of the IBM report.

The concept of ‘special libraries’ is not commonly understood by non-librarians, hence the report describes the concept refers to “libraries which are neither public libraries nor libraries
in the academic sector. As such, special libraries can range from large unites in multinational corporations to one-person libraries in small voluntary organisations. It is rather surprising to see academic libraries excluded from this definition, as these are often the practitioner’s source for easy access to international journals and publications. Unfortunately, one cannot fail to notice in this definition and elsewhere in the report the parochial battles between special libraries (yes, indeed, such as NISW) and academic libraries. Whilst there may indeed be a substantial difference in terms of resources and infrastructure (including access to digital networks), from the user perspective there are no strong arguments to justify drawing such a demarcation line between both types of libraries.

The report outlines the 1997 state of affairs of technology availability in special libraries and highlights that staff time and skills are probably more critical barriers to digital libraries than mere access to technology. Likewise, the survey of practitioners highlighted the role of funding, skills development and the need of changing managerial attitudes.

While the necessary small scale of the surveys and the use of convenience samples made extensive quantitative analysis inappropriate, the report provides a comprehensive overview of the many issues involved in bridging the gap both between real libraries and digital libraries and between research and practice. It is encouraging to know that since the publication of this report, the UK Department of Health has initiated large scale initiatives of digital libraries which will not be limited to medical staff but encompass social workers.

Moving beyond the remits of this report on digital libraries, one wonders whether the further dissemination of internet into human service agencies isn’t going to make the whole concept of a library obsolete. The NISW report provides you with a thrilling overview of studies into information behaviour of social workers, going back to a 1923 accusation of social workers not reading any professional literature. One may regret it, but the consistent message of this research is that practitioners prefer verbal and informal media. Nothing new here, given other research such as Mintzberg’s 1973 study into information behaviour of managers and Donald Schön’s work on the reflective practitioner. Reflecting on all this, one wonders whether the interactive elements of internet (email, chat-rooms, …) will not have a more profound impact on professionals’ information behaviour than more accessible libraries and full text publications.

**Lessons from the two examples**

We welcome the arrival of online publications as it democratises the access to information. Consequently, our hope is that academicians will soon free themselves from the yoke of academic publishers.

Naturally, online publications as a new media comes with a range of glitches that need sorting out.

Among those, the obsoleteness of page numbers. As users have control over font size and page sizes, you can no longer rely on page numbers for guiding colleagues to a paragraph or section of great interest. Hence, when we drew your attention to the ‘999’ metaphor in the IBM report, we had to quote the paragraph number. For authors of online publications, the message is to include clear chapter, section and paragraph identification.

Additionally, online publications in general could do with increased lay-out and design for online publications. The IBM report is made available through a PDF file, replicating its original attractive design of the printed version. For the standard office laser printer, this design is far less appropriate. The NISW digital library report is very basic in design which makes for readable prints, but is cumbersome to download as each section is a different web
Why not provide a simple button on each cover page of online publications enabling download of a printable complete version of the document? Once printed, online (well, ok, offline from then onwards) publications are more cumbersome to archive than traditional books. Books tend to fit nicely on bookshelves and support each other in standing upright, a bundle of printed pages less so. However, I feel confident that in due course we will not only have a desk printer but also a small office book binding machine that enables us to comfortably package printed copies of online publications.

Finally, there is the problematic issue of link-rot. A document might be available at a certain web address one moment and might well be gone the next. It might have disappeared altogether for legitimate reasons or just moved to another address. Apart from a plea for authors to have at least a page up and running notifying readers if and where the document can be found, there seems to be little we can do about link-rot. As a reader, you might try searching the document through one of the web search engines, but that is often a tedious task.

The morale of these reviews: don’t buy shares in academic publishers, buy shares of the company to produce and market office book binding machines.

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